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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:  
SENIOR OFFICER ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM INTERVIEW OF  
LIEUTENANT GENERAL (RETIRED) WALTER F. ULMER, JR.**

**BY**

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United States Army**

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LIEUTENANT GENERAL (RETIRED) WALTER F. ULMER, JR.

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper summarizes information provided by Lieutenant General (Retired) Walter F. Ulmer, Jr. during interviews conducted by Lieutenant Colonel Rick Lynch in December 1995 as part of the U.S. Army War College/U.S. Army Military History Institute Senior Officer Oral History Program. The summary presents a brief overview of LTG Ulmer's life and career. The focus of the summary concerns LTG Ulmer's demonstrated moral courage and personal integrity. Citing examples from LTG Ulmer's career, the author provides insight into the physical courage and leadership demonstrated by LTG Ulmer. The transcript of the interviews is in the archives of the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5008.

Lieutenant General Walter F. Ulmer, Jr., U.S. Army Retired, stands out in contemporary military history as a role model- one that we should all try to emulate. He is reknowned for his moral courage and personal integrity. His thirty -three years of active duty are replete with examples of doing the harder right instead of the easier wrong.<sup>1</sup> I recently had the privledge of conducting the Senior Officer Oral History Interview with General Ulmer. The transcripts of that interview are available at the Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. The purpose of this article is to provide insights from that interview to allow the reader an inside glimpse of one of the outstanding military leaders of this century. There are "pearls of wisdom" to be gained from studying this man's history and his teachings. In his own words, "You can learn from some living folks as well as some dead folks, and the living folks are usually easier to talk to."<sup>2</sup> In addition, there are insights into leader development that we as an Army should capture. Some of those insights come from General Ulmer's personal views, and some come from a study of General Ulmer's own development as a leader.<sup>3</sup>

It must be emphasized that this effort is not a result of General Ulmer's personal encouragement. He remains to this day the same unpretentious, selfless individual that he was on active duty, and is uncomfortable in the limelight. The words he told reporters in Texas on the eve of his retirement in 1985 still ring true today. When asked about the purpose of the interview,

he stated "I'm here at somebody else's request, not mine, and I hope that this will be worth your while. We'll try to do something spectacular, but not unseemly."<sup>4</sup>

General Ulmer was born in Bangor, Maine. He entered the United States Military Academy in 1948, and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant of Armor in 1952. Throughout his active duty career General Ulmer commanded at all levels from Platoon to Corps. He commanded three Companies, a Cavalry Squadron, a Separate Brigade, an Armored Division and an Armored Corps. In addition to that he held several extremely important positions such as the Deputy Commanding General of the Armor Center at Fort Knox, Kentucky and the Commandant of Cadets at the United States Military Academy. He was the Assistant Division Commander of the 2nd Armored Division. He also served as the Director of Human Resources, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel.

General Ulmer served two tours in Vietnam. On his first tour he served on the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam staff and as an Advisor to the 40th Infantry Regiment, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). On his second tour he was the Senior Advisor to the 5th ARVN Division during the seige of An Loc, and Chief of Staff of the Third Regional Assistance Command. He served on the Joint Military Commission that oversaw with withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam.

General Ulmer was successful in all endeavors, both personally and professionally. His success can be partially attributed to specific traits and competencies. The first thing

that comes to most people's minds when they think of Walt Ulmer is moral courage and personal integrity. Retired Army Colonel Mike Malone cites Ulmer's "ethics and morals" as his strongest traits.<sup>5</sup> In addition to that, General Ulmer displayed a high degree of personal courage at extremely difficult times.

General Ulmer always believes in the best of people. He claims "Good people, when they find that they have some freedom of maneuver, will amaze you with the creativity and the dedication they have."<sup>6</sup> He is convinced that no one intentionally comes to work intent on doing less than his best. The key, from his perspective, is to develop ways to direct that enthusiasm into productive ventures. General Ulmer is widely known for putting into practice the concept of "power down". "Power down (empowering leaders) involves aligning priorities, missions, and objectives with the requisite authority, sense of responsibility and resources for their accomplishment. Officers, NCOs and soldiers will do the work suited to their positions in the unit."<sup>7</sup>

General Ulmer has great people skills. He is a great listener, and is extremely approachable. He has a sense of humor that never fails him. He is a great communicator and teacher. He has a common sense approach to all endeavors. In a 1984 issue of Newsweek magazine, which had General Ulmer on the cover, he is quoted as saying "The essence of a general's job is to assist in developing a clear sense of purpose.....to keep the junk from getting in the way of important things."<sup>8</sup> That article labeled

General Ulmer the "No-Nonsense General."

The primary attribute that served General Ulmer well in his military career was his moral courage and personal convictions. Retired Army Major General Perry Smith, himself a noted leadership expert, claims that Walt Ulmer "...stood and spoke out on a number of occasions, despite serious risks to (his) career, opting to do the right thing and avoid the cowardice of silence."<sup>9</sup> This moral courage became evident at numerous times throughout his thirty three years of commissioned service, and deserve examination in greater detail.

After attending the U.S. Army War College in 1968, then Lieutenant Colonel Ulmer remained at the War College on the staff and faculty in the Department of Research and Studies.<sup>10</sup> As part of that department, Colonel Ulmer participated in three major studies that dealt with the status of our profession. These include the Study on Military Professionalism, the Leadership for the 1970's study, and a study on the curriculum of the War College.<sup>11</sup> All of these studies had a profound impact on the leadership of our Army at the time. The Study on Military Professionalism was conducted at the direction of the Chief of Staff of the Army, GEN Westmoreland. The results of the study were briefed by Colonel's Ulmer and Malone to the Army's leadership at a Commander's Conference. In the study, and during the briefing, Colonel Ulmer painted a picture of an Army which "...includes an ambitious, transitory commander, marginally skilled in the complexities of his duties- engulfed in producing

statistical results, fearful of personal failure, too busy to talk with or listen to his subordinates, and determined to submit acceptably optimistic reports which reflect faultless completion of a variety of tasks at the expense of the sweat and frustration of his subordinates.<sup>12</sup> The briefing itself received a mixed reception from the attendees at the conference. One Lieutenant General slammed his fist on the desk and proclaimed "That is not the Army I know", to which one of his peers replied "You know, that is probably one of the problems, you probably don't know."<sup>13</sup> The report included a variety of recommendations as to how to improve our profession. General Westmoreland wanted to use the report to make changes in the Army's personnel system and some other systems, but didn't want to make the report public out of concern that it would be used against the Army by the media. General Ulmer applauds General Westmoreland's courage to ask for the study and understands his decision to keep it close hold. As a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army, General Ulmer was asked by the Army's leadership to deliver a candid assessment of the state of our profession, and he did just that.

General Ulmer was the Commandant of Cadets at the United States Military Academy from 1975 - 1977. During his tenure two major events took place. The first was the admission of women to the Academy and the second was a major honor scandal involving the Class of 1977.

General Ulmer was in charge of a monumental effort to admit women to the Military Academy. He claims "This was a

Congressional decision that we had no control over, one way or another. Most senior people in the Army were surprised and probably dismayed at this change. Our responsibility was to implement it. We had a relatively short period of time. We studied institutions that had undergone the same kinds of transitions all around the country, everywhere from the Los Angeles Police Department to Yale University. We gathered a number of specialists in a variety of fields, female physiology and psychology, uniform designers, a whole lot of different kinds of people."<sup>14</sup> The admission of women to West Point was a complete success, primarily a result of General Ulmer's dedication to mission accomplishment.

Unfortunately at about the same time as the activity that brought women to West Point was happening, a major honor scandal was brewing. Ultimately, 151 cadets from the Class of 1977 were found guilty of honor violations and were removed from the class.<sup>15</sup> During this period General Ulmer stood for what he knew was right. He knew that the cadets had been duly processed and had been found guilty and should be punished. Genral Ulmer had "deep concerns about the future of the Honor Code"<sup>16</sup> and was resistant to make dramatic changes. He was against allowing the cadets who were found guilty to return to the Academy. He states "First, there were no circumstances that I knew of where cadets were forced to lie, cheat, or steal. We found that many of the cadets had apparently violated the Honor Code on other occasions in addition to that specific exam.... I didn't think

that (readmission of the guilty cadets) was an appropriate solution but I thought that it would not necessarily destroy the Academy. Obviously it did not. But I didn't think it was a good solution"<sup>17</sup> . When outside influences tried to get him to chance his stance, he stood his ground. His position ultimately caused him to be prematurely removed from his position as Commandant of Cadets, and to head off into an uncertain future to a previously unfilled position as the Assistant Division Commander of the 2nd Armored Division.

As a Major General in 1978, Ulmer was the Director of Human Resources in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel. During that time DCSPER personnel worked world wide data collection to ascertain the state of the Army. This data was compiled into a periodic Human Readiness Report. The data in the 1978 report was of concern to General Ulmer. He states "It was clear to me that this data supported some of my anecdotal observations that we had some problems that were leading to ill discipline."<sup>18</sup> In his preface to the report that he forwarded up the chain of command he noted that "this report did not show an improvement from the last report, as a matter of fact, it indicated that there were some quality problems within the Army."<sup>19</sup> General Ulmer was subsequently directed to modify his position, but refused to. He felt that it was important to bring the findings to light, and not to modify them. Again, he stood his ground at a potential risk to his career.

In 1979 General Ulmer became the Commander of the 3rd

Armored Division in the Federal Republic of Germany. As Division Commander, General Ulmer vocalized his concerns about women on the battlefield. He wanted to ensure that everyone realized that women were all over the battlefield, and there would surely be female casualties if war erupted. In a letter to the Commander, United States Army USAREUR he indicated that "women were all over the battlefield---some women were in our Signal Detachment up with the covering force-- and that were we to go to war, there would be a significant number of female casualties."<sup>20</sup> General Ulmer was concerned that there would be a knee jerk reaction to inevitable female casualties that would prompt decisions to remove them from the battlefield in time of war, and that would be disastrous to his Division's conduct of operations. His position was in direct opposition to some of the high level rhetoric of that day. But again, the problem had to be voiced and Walt Ulmer was the man to voice it.

In addition to moral courage, General Ulmer also displayed a high degree of personal courage throughout his career. In 1972, then Colonel Ulmer was reassigned from his position on the staff and faculty of the U.S. Army War College and sent off to Vietnam for his second tour. In a matter of days, he was thrust into a horrendous situation as the Senior Advisor to the 5th Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Division in An Loc. The town of An Loc was under a siege by three North Vietnamese Army Divisions. The day after Ulmer arrived 8300 enemy artillery rounds impacted in the town. Ulmer and his fellow advisors controlled 297 tactical

air sorties during the period 11 - 14 May 1972.<sup>21</sup> General Ulmer states "I didn't think anything about courage; I just thought that was what I was supposed to do. I was too busy to worry about anything, I was just doing my thing. That is no big deal. What would you expect an American Colonel to do?"<sup>22</sup> He further states " About the night of the 10th or 11th of May, we sort of thought it might be all over. It was interesting there that each of us kind of made peace with whatever it was going to be. I found it was an intellectual, emotional, and interesting challenge to shift gears and say, "OK, we are probably not going to get out of here'. I have found that once you have made that decision, you put that stuff behind you and get on with business."<sup>23</sup> General Ulmer's close associates at that time also cite his poise and confidence under pressure as a calming factor during the crisis.

General Ulmer clearly is a role model for all of us. Each of us should aspire to be a man of personal integrity, moral and personal courage of the caliber of Walt Ulmer. And we can do that- simply by doing what we know is right. Knowing what is right is rarely the issue. The hard part is doing the right thing. A study of General Ulmer's career shows us that it is possible to be successful, and still always do the right thing. We should take solace in that fact. In addition, we have an obligation to mold tomorrow's leaders in his image. An examination of the possible origins of some of the traits of Walt Ulmer will help us in that endeavor.

First and foremost, General Ulmer was molded by his family during his youth. He states "My family provided an extraordinarily comfortable, supportive and trusting environment."<sup>24</sup> He grew up surrounded by adults. His home had his Mother and Father, his Sister, his Grandmother and Grandfather, and an Aunt all living together. He was never lacking in adult leadership and council. Someone was always there to listen to him and to help him through whatever situation he was experiencing. "The feeling and sense about people in the house was that all people should be trusted; that there was no skepticism or cynicism every in the house; that in life you should be able to do whatever you wanted and surely would succeed. There was a pervasive sense of an assumption of fairness and trust. Among the rules that I thought permeated the world were that everyone was supposed to be treated fairly and you didn't talk negatively about people or institutions."<sup>25</sup> The environment at home during General Ulmer's formative years impacted on everything he did subsequently. He left home convinced of the self worth of the individual and with an intense trust of his fellow man.

It is clear that the dominant figure in General Ulmer's life was his father, Retired Army Colonel Walter F. Ulmer. General Ulmer's father was an extremely strong role model for his son. He was a member of the Maine National Guard. He fought in World War II. Colonel Ulmer exposed his son to the military throughout his childhood, but never directly encouraged him to join. His

father took him to visit the Armory and to observe training. Colonel Ulmer showed his son repeated examples of the importance of personal integrity and moral courage.

General Ulmer was blessed by his wife, Marty, who stood by him throughout his career. He met his wife while he was a student at Bates College prior to his entrance to the Military Academy. He recalls "The most significant thing (about his time at Bates) was that I met her and she has performed a very remarkable role in my development. She has been a remarkable leader and friend to a lot of people over the years. She had been and she retains now an ability to interact with people whether it is a Private's wife or an Ambassador's wife with the same degree of relaxed competence."<sup>26</sup> General Ulmer claims "She was able to gain the confidence and respect of women in organizations in every place that I had been. While she was very active and participative and did all of the things, she did it in a way that motivated through desire to do these things as opposed to a feeling that it was a command necessity. This is a very thin line. The Army has not been straight on the role of wives. There are extraordinary pressures on wives because many of them work, many of them have children that are at vulnerable ages, most of them are apprehensive about the awesome responsibilities of taking care of soldiers who are far from home and families and everything else. Marty and I tried to set the example of behavior. It is a very, very thin line between motivating people to take responsibility for community affairs and forcing people to

do something that they don't want to do or feel that they shouldn't do."<sup>27</sup> Marty provided the balance in the Ulmer family. Her personality complemented his.

Throughout his career General Ulmer was surrounded by good friends with like minds and interests. These people gave General Ulmer solace and comfort during the hard times. General Ulmer spent numerous hours talking with his friends about how to improve their profession. As was noted earlier, the friend with the most profound influence on General Ulmer was Mike Malone. Their relationship started in the early 1970's, and lasted all the way until Colonel Malone's death this past year. They were identical in their way of thinking, and they reinforced each other.

Even in his early years, General Ulmer worked with his contemporaries to improve our profession. General Ulmer had strong beliefs and personal convictions that he carried throughout his career. For example, after commissioning, General Ulmer started a "Permanent Military Principles Notebook." In this notebook he recorded his thoughts on our profession. Early in his career a large number of his contemporaries were leaving the service. As young Lieutenant, Ulmer thought through this and he wrote the following entry in his notebook:

"Reasons for Resignation of High Caliber Personnel (1955-57)

- 1) General sense of futility caused by inefficient, semi-honest officers; fast turnover of personnel; lack of honest attempt at real training as opposed to superficial programs; short tours and "long" efficiency reports; re-inlistment of low caliber EM; retention of poor officers; lack of funds for proper training within a normal duty day- the 60 hour work week is more common

than uncommon. A sense of being on a treadmill in attempting to develop a combat ready unit and a chaos of conflicting personal goals. Some means have become ends- DR's shines, AWOL rate, reup %, funds savings.

2) Little chance for real promotion (increased pay or rank) on the basis of ability until after 12 - 20 years of service. (Being improved somewhat)

3) Long hours caused by: lack of funds and personnel to perform heavy training- admin requirements; extra admin and show; the assumption of the burden by conscientious officers. Family, shopping, recreation may be almost non existent for months. Post facilities not reasonably available- hours and uniform restrictions. Rental typewriters a common practice indicative of the situation.

4) Reserve programs more enticing than RA in many ways.

5) Unstable home life. Overseas, maneuvers, hours, PCS's are both an attraction and an obstacle.

6) The soldier is always available for blood and money donations, all nite duty. Only some of it is necessary.

7) Commanders competition often results in harassment to the troops. Grass planting, floor waxing, starched fatigues, requirements to buy non issue uniform items, etc. Emphasis on a program's statistical results is a dangerous method unless carefully analyzed and controlled.

#### Reasons for Remaining 1956 - 1957

1. Sense of accomplishment of something important in successfully training a fighting team.
2. Active, outdoor, competitive, challenging work.
3. Comradship of soldiers, a sense of belonging, pride in traditions.
4. Periodic change of locations.
5. Adequate pay and good retirement benefits.

Walt Ulmer was a man who took his profession very seriously, from his commissioning to this very day. His thoughts and convictions were steadfast.

General Ulmer, as he recalls the West Point Honor Scandal, reflects " During the entire West Point episode, by the way, my

family of course, Marty and the kids, were totally, absolutely understanding and supportive. They put up with an awful lot of stress. The support that I received and felt all around the Army, particularly from my classmates and friends and people who work for me was just overwhelming. I have always remembered that."<sup>28</sup>

General Ulmer always made his family a priority. He had an ability to separate his family life from his professional one, even in the toughest of times. He states "I am sure that I didn't do it perfectly, but I think coming from the kind of family background that I had family was always important. Apparently, we were successful in not being so consumed by what was going on in the work day that it slopped over into what we did in the afternoon and the evening with the kids. It just seemed that around the supper table that you should be talking about things that everyone is interested in."<sup>29</sup>

General Ulmer continues to make contributions to our Army. After his retirement from active duty, General Ulmer became the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, South Carolina. He retired from that position in 1994. Today he lectures and consults extensively on the topic of leadership. We can continue to learn from him.

General Ulmer is always advocating the concept of self awareness. He claims " The utility of enhanced self-awareness remains an abstract to many senior leaders."<sup>30</sup> In addition he is

convinced that we as an Army must improve our evaluation system, to include 360 degree evaluations. He claims " We call the complete thing the 360 degree feedback where you get input about your behavior from boss, peers, and subordinates. Subordinate input is the most powerful in revealing your leadership strengths and weaknesses and aspects of your integrity as well. The boss's orientation is, and should be, mission accomplishment; subordinate orientation is , and will always be, leader integrity and care. We can achieve that 360 degree evaluation by a more robust system of feedback for the people who have worked with and for us. We should spend a little more time conceptually talking about it and considerably more time talking in terms of our psychological makeup and understand how we can best learn from our experiences so that we continue to grow."<sup>31</sup>

While serving as the Commander, 3rd Armored Division Ulmer summed it up best: "A final note is that proper individual value systems within the officer corps are essential both to good leadership and to healthy organizations. The willingness to make sacrifices, to take risks in the interest of mission and the soldiers, to look deeply inside and figure out what really motivates us are simply key to building a climate of special trust and confidence. In assessing our value systems, we need to address the operative relative priorities of self, superior, subordinate, unit and professional ethics- and try to not kid ourselves as we make the analysis and pledge to move ever closer to what we know is right."<sup>32</sup>

We should always remember that the mark of a great career is not so much the rank you attain, but the legacy you leave behind. Your success is measured in the hearts and minds of the soldiers and family members you touch. General Ulmer will always be remembered as a great leader and role model who never failed to do the right thing.

## **NOTES**

1. These words were taken from the West Point Cadet Prayer.
2. "Ft Hood Chief Retiring with Scalp Intact", Austin American Statesman, 19 May 1985, pg B9.
3. To complement the interviews with General Ulmer himself, the author conducted telephonic interviews with many of General Ulmer's friends, family and associates. The author would like to express his gratitude to COL(R) Mike Malone, BG(R) John C. Bahnsen, MG(R) James Dozier, COL(R) Ernie Cross, CSM(R) Ron Hammer, COL(R) Max Snodgrass, COL(R) Rick Ordway, MG(R) Tom Cole, COL(R) Robert McGowan, LTC Bob Hauser, CPT Tom Ulmer, COL(R) Mike Sirkis, Mrs. Marty Ulmer, COL(R) Tom Green, LTC Buck Ulmer, COL Bob Brace, Mr. Dave Getchall, Mrs. Marlene Douglas, and COL(R) Ed Benedit. Each of these individuals freely gave up of their time to share their memories of General Ulmer with me, and added a unique perspective to this effort.
4. "Ft Hood Chief Retiring with Scalp Intact", Austin American Statesman, 19 May 1985, pg B9.
5. Telephonic interview with Retired Army Colonel Mike Malone, 28 November 1995.
6. Senior Officer Oral History Interview of Lieutenant General Walter F. Ulmer, Jr. Interview conducted by LTC Rick Lynch, 18 - 19 December 1995, Roanoke, Virginia. Copies of the interview transcript are available at the Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.
7. Fort Hood Leadership Study, Combined Arms Training Activity, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1986.
8. "The No-Nonsense General", Newsweek 9 July 1984.
9. "Past, present leaders are future's role models." Army Times, 24 Sep 1990.
10. For a discussion on the activities at the War College during General Ulmer's time on the faculty there, see Harry Ball's Of Responsible Command, U.S. Army War College Alumni Association, 1983.
11. All three of these studies are available in the archives of the Military History Institute.

12. Study on Military Professionalism, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, 30 June 1970.
13. James Kittfield, Prodigal Soldiers, Simon and Schuster, 1995.
14. Oral History Interview, pg. 174.
15. For a perspective of the Honor Scandal read the results of the "Borman Commission", found in the "Report to the Secretary of the Army by the Special Commission on the United States Military Academy".
16. Oral History Interview, 1996.
17. Oral History Interview, pg 196
18. Oral History Interviews, pg 211.
19. Oral History Interviews, pg 211
20. Oral History Interview, pg 232
21. For details of the events that transpired in An Loc, Republic of Vietnam in April - May 1972 see (1) Phillip Clarke, "The Battle that Saved Saigon", Readers Digest, March 1973, pg 151 or James H. Wilbanks, "Thiet Gap! The Battle of An Loc, April 1972, U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.
22. Oral History Interview pg 137.
23. Oral History Interview pg 148
24. Oral History Interview pg. 1.
25. Oral History Interview, pg.6
26. Oral History Interview, pg. 10.
27. Oral History Interview, pg 235.
28. Oral History Interviews, pg. 191.
29. Oral History Interview, pg 184.
30. Walter F. Ulmer, Jr., "Missing Links in the Education of Senior Leaders", The Public Manager. The New Bureacrat. Summer 1994, pg. 9.
31. Oral History Interview, page 109.
32. Walter F. Ulmer, Jr., "Notes on Leadership for the 1980's", Military Review, July 1980, pg. 12.

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